Foundations of Criticality: applications of traditional monastic pedagogy in Myanmar[1]

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Abstract

It is well documented in scholarship that standardized, non-secularised monastic examinations in Myanmar have resulted in an education system that focuses on rote learning. Through a multidisciplinary study of monastic education in Myanmar and modern educational theories, this article investigates how Burmese monks and nuns study Buddhist texts in formal monastic curricula and what pedagogical and learning approaches are applied in their study of Buddhist texts. I shall give particular attention to the process of acquiring expert knowledge through the use of mnemonic techniques. This article demonstrates that the textual expertise developed through memorisation and detailed study of both canonical and exegetical Buddhist texts in fact provides a basis for criticality, i.e. a practice encompassing analytical skills, logical thinking skills and the ability to think anew. In order to explore the Burmese pedagogical and learning approaches, I shall discuss the significance of scriptural learning within the socio-political climate of Myanmar and pedagogical philosophy of teaching monasteries and nunneries. Along the way, I shall point out, albeit only briefly, some differences between teaching and learning approaches used in Higher Education in the UK and those of monastic teaching institutions of Myanmar.

Key terms: critical thinking; higher education; monastic education; mnemonic techniques; liberal democracy.

Introduction

This article investigates the way in which Buddhist texts in formal monastic curricula of Myanmar are studied by monastics.[2] In particular, I shall examine how Burmese monastic educationists and teachers develop their textual erudition, and what pedagogical and learning approaches are applied to the study of Buddhist texts. As Khammai Dhammasāmi observes, the standardized, non-secularised monastic curricula in Myanmar have inhibited a higher level of learning skills such as learning by critical questioning and independent thinking amongst monastic students within the context of formal education (Dhammasāmi 2004: 274-279). In addition, the monastic curricula of Myanmar have never been secularized (Schober 2007: 59-63) –

[1] I use the term 'Myanmar' through out this article. When I am referring to events during the colonial period, I use the term 'Burma'.

[2] I use the word 'monastics' to refer to both monks and precept-nuns, unless I specifically draw distinctions between them, although precept-nuns are unrecognized as monastics by the state in Myanmar. See Houtman (1990: 70-71) for distinctions between the status and titles used for monks and for precept-nuns in Myanmar.

unlike Thailand and Laos – where modern, secular subjects such as Geography, Mathematics, Education and Social Sciences are included in the monastic curricula.[3] This article aims to shed light on the process of acquiring expert knowledge on Buddhist texts through rote learning by Burmese monastics. I shall then propose that the textual expertise and erudition developed through memorisation and the detailed study of both canonical and exegetical Buddhist texts do in fact provide a basis upon which criticality (see below) can be expressed by innovative monastic teachers.

In the discussion that follows I draw on strands of literature on 'critical theory', 'educational theory', 'the art of memory', and my own research on the living tradition of *Abhidhamma*, 'analytical philosophy', in contemporary Myanmar. The aim of using a multidisciplinary approach here is to demonstrate that the concept of criticality is informed by social and political conditions, and that freedom to exercise criticality is curtailed by religious, social, and political boundaries.

Two concepts in this article that I draw on from critical theory in education are 'critical thinking' and 'critical pedagogy'. Critical thinking and critical pedagogy are relevant here because "each invokes the term 'critical' as a valued educational goal" (Burbules and Berk 1999: 45), and the goals of critical thinking appear in the rhetoric of current educational reform in many societies across the globe (Mason 2008: 1). Although critical thinking has been portrayed as a desirable educational goal that would equip a student with transferable skills and enable him/her to be a 'life-long' learner, there are scholarly debates as to whether critical thinking is a set of skills that can be taught or is a human disposition that is inherent in individuals.[4] More importantly, there is a well-documented phenomenon of learning by rote-memorisation—as opposed to learning by critical questioning—amongst Asian students (and many other traditional cultures). Moreover, it is well accepted in the literature that education in different countries is informed by widely differing historical and cultural conditions (*ibid.*). However, there is the seeming neglect to admit that rote learning is a feature of most traditional cultures and presumably orginates in oral transmission techniques. It is important, then, to ask what proximate conditions there are in Asian educational systems, including in Burmese monastic education, that have encouraged the emphasis and promotion of rote learning.

[3] See article in this volume by Phibul Choompolpaisal on the developments of monastic education in Thailand. It should be noted that there is a variability in the degree of secularisation of monastic curricula in Buddhist countries, e.g. the monastic curricula in Laos are highly secularized. See McDaniel (2008: 25-68) for detailed discussion on the development of monastic curricula in Laos.

[4] See Mason (2008: 1-11) and Burbules and Berk (1999: 45-65) on how the term 'critical thinking' is conceptualized by different educational philosophers such as Robert Ennis, Richard Paul, Harvey Siegel and Jane R. Martin.

To be 'critical' in the critical thinking tradition means "to be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth" (Burbules and Berk 1999: 46). The main focus of critical thinking is "to supplant sloppy or distorted thinking with thinking based upon reliable procedures of inquiry" (*ibid*.), with an aim to liberate oneself from "the unwarranted and undesirable control of unjustified beliefs" (Siegel 1988: 58, cit. in *ibid.*: 47).[5] In the critical pedagogy tradition, 'a critical person' is empowered to seek justice and social emancipation by assessing critically truth or conceptual slipperiness to contest power relations and differentials (*ibid.*: 47 and 50-53). The focus of critical pedagogy is to assess how an issue relates to the underlying power structure of social, institutional and political relations in order to achieve social emancipation. While there are differences between these two traditions, both critical thinking and critical pedagogy agree that "critical education can increase freedom and enlarge the scope of human possibilities" (*ibid.*: 46). Ronald Barnett argues for the role of the university in the development of "critical being" by "empowering students to understand themselves critically and to act critically so that they are not subject to the world but are able to act autonomously and purposively within it" (Barnett 1997: 6, cited in Moore *et al.* 2011: 64). The (Western) understanding then is that university in general helps equip students to become the 'critical citizens' who are the ideal in a liberal democracy. In the Western political framework, i.e. liberal democracy, the criticality agenda is a crucial component in education for democratic citizenship. This education should meet what Osborne describes as the "twelve C's", e.g. a focus on the cosmopolitan nature of the world as a whole, thinking critically and creatively, and becoming informed and involved in one's communities, locally, nationally, and globally (Osborne 2001: 42-43, cited in Evans 2006: 413). This resonates with Barnett's notion of 'critical being' in that the aim of education is to develop 'critical citizens' who are the backbone of liberal democracy. These social and political implications of criticality are mostly implicit in many areas of the Western education system.

Barnett defines the term 'criticality' as "a human disposition of engagement where it is recognized that the object of attention could be other than it is" (Barnett 1997: 179). Although Barnett sees 'criticality' as a human disposition that is inherent in individuals, I—following Burbules and Berk's definition—would think of it as a practice. Therefore, the term 'criticality' in our discussion can be understood as a practice which encompasses not only analytical and logical thinking skills but also the ability to think anew. This implies that criticality is something that people practise by applying analytical, logical thinking and by exercising their ability to think

[5] For an overview of the literature on critical thinking, see the article in this volume by Ligeia Lugli.

outside a framework of standardized norms and worldviews. Criticality as a practice may be informed or curtailed by the educational training that one receives, as well as social, political and cultural factors within which one operates. Therefore, critical thinking and critical pedagogy—which are concerned with logical truth and the power structure of society respectively—are relevant to our discussion of Burmese monastic education.

In addition to the concepts of critical thinking and critical pedagogy in educational theories, I draw on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives in order to illustrate some parallels between the Burmese perceptions of different levels of learning goals and a western analysis of knowledge and learning objectives. In 1956, Benjamin Bloom and other American educational psychologists published a book called *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* dealing with different aspects of human learning. The cognitive taxonomy developed in this work has come to be known as 'Bloom's taxonomy' and has influenced our ways of thinking about learning objectives as well as the evolution of one's knowledge and one's ability to create new ideas. In Bloom's original taxonomy, six cognitive domains are identified: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. 'Knowledge' as a function of cognition—which involves 'remembering', 'memorising' or 'retrieving previously learned material'—is the foundation on which other intellectual operations can be performed (Wilson 2013). In the early 2000s, one of the original authors, David Krathwohl, and a student of Bloom, Lorin Anderson, revised the original taxonomy and replaced the nouns with verbs for the cognitive functions.[6] That is, in the revised cognitive taxonomy, the learning process develops as follows: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating. In both versions of the taxonomy, the first cognitive function—'knowledge' or 'remembering'—is important for the development of other intellectual abilities and skills. The Burmese perception of rote learning as the essential foundation for an advanced level of study and creative thinking, as we shall see below, resonates in part with Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.

Studying Buddhism in Higher Education in the UK

I now want to provide a brief overview of teaching and learning approaches in studying Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) at university in the UK.[7] This section aims to provide a

[6] See Wilson (2013) for a comparison between Bloom's original taxonomy and the recent revised taxonomy by Anderson and Krathwohl, and how the latter aims to address a conceptual gap between the 'knowledge' category and the other five categories which pertain to higher levels of cognitive process such as analysis, synthesis *etc*.
[7] I have been studying for an HE teaching qualification at King's Learning Institute since October 2014.

contrastive background for our investigation of the study of Buddhist scriptures at traditional, monastic institutions in Myanmar.

There is a trend toward a student-centred approach to teaching in Higher Education in the UK (Klenowski 1995; Richardson 2005). In this approach, the role of the teacher is to act as a facilitator of learning (Spronken-Smith and Walker 2010: 726). The teacher is encouraged to adopt open, interactive teaching methods in order to stimulate and engage students' academic interest and to facilitate the growth of knowledge through critical thinking and reflective learning. There is a wider, growing interest in criticality in the UK.[8] What this means in practice is the teacher may use small-group teaching techniques such as pair-work or role-play, etc. in order to encourage students to think laterally and consider interconnections between different facets of the topic under discussion. Moreover, at postgraduate research programmes, training courses are provided to introduce and nurture research skills and critical thinking required for the programme. For instance, in my first year on the PhD programme at SOAS, I went on training workshops run by SOAS and University College London in which generic research skills, including critical thinking, academic writing and interview skills were explored. Skills related to lateral thinking, i.e. the ability to see relations between different concepts and ideas, and to synthesise them to form a coherent new whole, are often mentioned in such training workshops. Since curricula and research projects in Western education system follow a thematic structure – for example, various topics such as *Jātaka* narratives, merit-making etc. are studied and linked through under a wider theme of karma, it is important for students to be equipped with skills required to think critically, as well as laterally. A student-centred approach to teaching with teacher as facilitator, therefore, allows for the development of skills and conditions necessary for critical and lateral thinking.[9]

In terms of the learning process, independent learning—also known as "self-directed learning" (Spronken-Smith and Walker 2010: 735)—is emphasized in the Western education system. According to the online guidelines on independent learning at King's College London, my current employer, it is "the work that you [students] do outside of class in order to broaden your engagement with your [students'] subject area" (http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/study/ug/beingastudent.aspx). The purpose of

[8] As Moore *et al.* observe, the word 'critical' appears frequently in the descriptors of undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications, and in 2001 'Critical Thinking' was introduced as an Advanced Subsidiary (AS) qualification (Moore *et al.*: 2011: 63-64).

[9] While a student-centred approach to teaching, and indeed learning, has many advantages and should facilitate critical and lateral thinking in theory, it should be noted that in actuality, it—like other teaching approaches—may or may not realize its full potential due to various constraints. See Klenowski (1995) and Richardson (2005) for detailed discussion on the problems regarding conceptualization and implementation of a student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

independent learning is to nurture reading culture amongst students by motivating them to read secondary sources and further primary sources, and seek out further sources relevant to the topic of study. One has to read around the topic using reading lists, which are normally provided to undergraduate students and taught graduate students. At research degree level, one has to create one's own reading list, i.e. bibliography.[10] Higher levels of learning skills such as the abilities to achieve a far deeper understanding and greater appreciation of the topic of study and to think critically through complex issues are some of the aims of independent learning (http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/trs/study/ug/beingastudent.aspx).

In addition to a student-centred approach to teaching and independent learning, there is an emphasis on evidence-based teaching and learning in the Western education system. The evidence-based teaching and learning approach means that the teacher would provide proper citations and sources for topics under discussion in lectures and seminars. Making proper citations and references in essays and assignments is therefore a crucial aspect of scholarly activity. A variety of formative and summative assessment methods such as end of year or module examinations, coursework essays, quizzes, oral presentations and so forth are also used in Higher Education. While there has been a move toward the use of a wide range of different forms of assessment in order to capture the range of abilities possessed by students, it can reasonably be suggested that writing coursework essays or reports or learning journals remains as the most popular form of assessment in the Western education system. In other words, the ability to express complex ideas and issues through writing is seen as the most valued educational goal.

In terms of the learning environment in a Western university, interaction between the teacher and students is often informal and open. For example, students can (usually) ask questions at any point in the lecture or seminar. Indeed, in my classes, I encourage students to ask questions and make comments, which can be used as a valuable assessment tool because such open interactions allow the teacher to assess the students' understanding and knowledge informally. As we shall see below, it is almost unheard of in Myanmar to interrupt and question the teacher while he/she is teaching (Dhammasāmi 2004: 277-278).

In terms of learning and teaching facilities, it is almost the norm now in Western universities to use modern information technologies such as audiovisual (AV) systems and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), in contrast to the lack of such facilities in monastic teaching institutions in Myanmar. The use of modern information technologies (if used properly) can

[10] Based on my own experience, compiling a reading list, which eventually became a bibliography, was the first task that I did at the beginning of my PhD research programme.

facilitate interactive learning and teaching, as well as broadening the range of means through which students can access information, according to their own learning preferences.

The development of transferrable skills such as essay writing, critical reading, critical thinking and lateral thinking is emphasised and actively encouraged in the contemporary Western education system. Many students will already have become used to them in their secondary schooling. We, as teachers and students in Higher Education in the UK, are familiar with such learning and teaching approaches to the extent that we take them for granted. As we shall see below, learning and teaching approaches used by Burmese monastic students in formal monastic curricula in Myanmar are rather different from the approaches to which students in the Western education system are accustomed. In order to explore the Burmese approach, it is important to examine the place of scriptural-learning (*pariyatti*) in Burmese monastic education and explain the purpose of establishing teaching monasteries in the following section.

The Significance of scriptural-learning (*pariyatti*) in the socio-political climate of Myanmar

This section explores two central, interrelated aspects of Burmese monastic education in Myanmar, namely the significance of 'scriptural-learning' (*pariyatti*)[11] in Burmese Buddhism and the organizational aims of teaching institutions. The term 'organizational aims' here refers to the purpose of establishing such teaching institutions for monastics and what they are trying to achieve in terms of personal and collective goals. As we shall see below, textual erudition achieved through years of dedication to the study of Buddhist texts by monastic literati is not only rewarded through position and prestige, but also seen as crucial for preservation of Buddhism and one's own monastic lineage. It is the importance attributed to scriptural learning by the Burmese that motivates the Sangha and the general laity to establish, sustain and support teaching institutions for monastics.

Teaching institutions for monastics have been established in large towns and cities such as Mandalay, Monywa and Pakhokku in upper Myanmar, and Yangon, Bago and Pyay in lower Myanmar. As in other South and Southeast Asian Buddhist countries, in Myanmar young boys may get ordained as novice monks (*sāmaṇera*) at village monasteries. Some of them then go to specialized teaching monasteries in order to pursue high school level and university level education. A well-developed system of village monasteries and teaching monasteries in the capital and in other big cities was long in place by the middle of the nineteenth century (Liberman 2003: 188, cit. in Braun 2013: 184, n. 11; Dhammasāmi 2004: 5). These specialized

[11] I follow Jason Carbine's translation of the Pāli term *pariyatti* as 'scriptural-learning' here.

teaching institutions usually accommodate hundreds of novice and fully ordained monks. For example, on average, one thousand monks are enrolled as students (*sa-thin-tha*) at a famous teaching monastery called Mahagandayon Sathintaik in Amarapura (7 miles southwest of Mandalay) in a given academic year. In some years, the number of monks enrolled as students at this teaching monastery goes up to one thousand five hundred. Unlike a modern university, these teaching institutions serve a range of functions for the monastic community and local community. They have been the centres of learning for monastics and the general laity,[12] 'fields of merit' – i.e. the spheres for religious activities – for lay people, and social space for local Buddhist communities.[13]

For Burmese monastics and the general laity, the primary purpose of establishing a teaching monastery is to provide a learning environment for *pariyatti* duties. In order to understand this purpose, it is important to look at the significance attributed to *pariyatti* by Burmese monastics. As Erik Braun observes, Burmese Buddhism had long valued the three dimensions of the Buddha's religion (*sāsana*): learning (*pariyatti*), practice or meditation (*paṭipatti*), and realization (*paṭivedha*) (Braun 2013: 119). Out of these three types of *sāsana*, *pariyatti* is regarded by Burmese monastics as the mainstay of the preservation of the Buddha's *sāsana*. *Pariyatti* is often compared to the edge of a pond by the Burmese, while the practice aspects of the *sāsana*, i.e. *paṭipatti*, is likened to the pond itself. In other words, *pariyatti* is like a container that holds both invaluable Buddhist practices and the benefits that stem from these practices, i.e. *paṭiveda-sāsana*. This analogy, then, implies that without *pariyatti*, the whole structure of the practice and realization components of the *sāsana* would fall apart. Jason Carbine analyses the dilemma posed by the pursuit of meditation on the one hand, and of teaching and learning of the Buddhist scriptures on the other. In his book on the developments the Shwegyin sect (see below), he presents *pariyatti* as "collective goods" with "communal benefit" (Carbine 2011: 68-70). For the monastics and lay people, *pariyatti* therefore is a collective work of teaching and learning of the canonical and post-canonical texts, and an embodying of the Buddha's *sāsana*.

In addition to the significance attributed to *pariyatti* by the Burmese monastics, it has been a key element in various monastic reforms implemented by monastic literati and Burmese kings in the recent history of Burmese Buddhism. In the late eighteenth century Myanmar, the First Maung-daung Sayadaw Ven. U Ñāṇābhivaṃsa (1753-1833), who was "the king's chief of religious affairs (*thathanabaing*)" (Charney 2006: 18), played a key role in the Thudhamma (*Sudhamma* in

[12] It is important to note that monasteries always have been centres of education for the lay people since pre-colonial Myanmar. In recent decades, monasteries across the country have become crucial for the provision of education for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and from ethnic minority groups.
[13] See Kyaw (2010: 5, 15 and 21) for social space provided by monasteries in Southeast Asian cultures.

Pāli) Reformation.[14] The Thudhamma Reformation was a monastic reform in which competing monastic fraternities were integrated into a single monastic order placed under the authority of the Thudhamma Council in the royal city, i.e. Mandalay (Charney 2006: 18). The early Thudhamma monks, namely followers of the Maung-daung Sayadaw, gave a particular emphasis on the learning and mastering of canonical and post-canonical Buddhist texts. Through memorisation and recitation of these texts and the composition of exegetical commentaries in Burmese on canonical texts such as the seven books of the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, the 'Basket of Higher Teaching',[15] the early Thudhamma monks displayed and sustained their textual authority (Charney 2006: 26; 39-47). This authoritative textualism of the Thudhamma monks was a central factor that helped to win the support of the court. With royal support and patronage, the Thudhamma monks were able to control Burmese monastic affairs from the late eighteenth century till the middle of the nineteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, divisions amongst the monastic community occurred again with the establishment of competing monastic sects (*nikāya*) (Charney 2006: 18). One of these sects, which attracted a great deal of scholarly attention from Burmese literati and observers of Myanmar, is the Shwegyin sect. The Shwegyin monks, like the Thudhamma monks, emphasised the significance of *pariyatti* for the good of the monastic community and the Buddha's *sāsana*. As Carbine notes, the First Shwegyin Sayadaw Ven. U Jāgara (1822-1894), the founder of the sect, in his letter to his disciple, the Kyaungtwaya Sayadaw Ven. U Sāsana (1843-1925), emphasised "the importance not only of combining *pariyatti* and *paṭipatti*, but also giving a very clear priority to *pariyatti*" (Carbine 2011: 70). Carbine also observes that "should the Kyaungtawya Sayadaw pursue his own meditation or *paṭipatti* too strenuously and too selfishly, he could detract from the quality of *pariyatti* that is so crucial to the Shwegyin line" (Carbine 2011: 70).[16] This attitude to *pariyatti* amongst Burmese monastics indicates that it is crucial not only for the benefit of the whole monastic community and the Buddha's *sāsana*, but also for monastic lineage.

The Anglo-Burmese wars and British colonialism in the 19th and early 20th century posed a threat to the existence of the kingdom of the Burmese.[17] This threat to the Burmese kingship

[14] Here, I—like Charney (2006) and Braun (2013)—follow Patrick Pranke's usage of the term 'reformation' (Pranke 2004: 1). On detailed analysis of the rise of the Thudhamma monks and the reformation led by them, see Charney (2005: 18-49; 89-107).

[15] Such exegetical texts on *Abhidhamma* in Burmese are known as *ayakauk*, 'pickup the essential meaning', texts. See Lwin (1961) and Kyaw (2014) for detailed analysis on the composition of *ayakauk* texts by Burmese monastic literati.

[16] Braun's analysis of how Ledi Sayadaw popularized insight meditation amongst Burmese laity through the popularization of *Abhidhamma* study in the early nineteenth century Myanmar merits our attention here because Ledi Sayadaw's innovative approach to study and meditation blurred the boundaries between study and practice. See Braun (2013: 102-149) for detailed discussion of Ledi Sayadaw's innovation in combining *pariyatti* and *paṭipatti*.

[17] This section on monastic education in the socio-political contexts of Burmese Buddhism is taken from Chapter 2, section 2 of my PhD thesis, '*Paṭṭhāna* in Burmese Buddhism', (Kyaw 2014: 116-121).

came to be perceived as, or equated with, a threat to Buddhism itself and Burmese Buddhist culture. Burmese kings had been successful at portraying themselves as guardians of Buddhism and were major sponsors of Buddhist activities. In response to the threat of the British, the Burmese, including the Sangha, became nationalistic after the end of the second Anglo-Burmese war (1852-1854) in which Burma lost the whole of Lower Burma to the British (Dhammasāmi 2004: 99). In spite of the difficult political situation King Mindon (r. 1853-1878) faced, he devoted an enormous effort to demonstrating his intention to safeguard the Buddhist scriptures, and by extension Buddhism itself. He did so through sponsoring of the copying of the *Tipiṭaka* on palm leaves and the inscribing of the texts on 729 marble slabs in 1860-1868. Prior to the copying Mindon had the texts examined closely for any errors by many monastic and lay literati so as to ensure purity (Braun 2013: 25). In 1871, after all the work to purify the texts and to record them on both palm leaves and stone, Mindon convened the Fifth Council, in which twenty-four hundred monks gathered to chant the entire *Tipiṭaka*.

King Thalun (r. 1629-1648) and King Bodawhpaya (r. 1782-1819), predecessors of Mindon, promoted monastic education for political reasons. In 1636, Thalun introduced, for the first time in the history of Burmese monastic education, formal monastic examinations (Dhammasāmi 2004: 11). The motive of Thalun for introducing the formal examinations was to purge a large number of monks from the Sangha who had fled to it to avoid military service and forced labour (*ibid.*: 73). Bodawhpaya of the Konbaung Period (1752-1885) also attempted to use formal examinations as a tool to control the Sangha (*ibid.*: 12). Bodawhpaya promoted the existing examination called *Pahtama-sar-taw-pyan,* 'excellent candidate for royal examination', which came to be known by its abbreviated form *Pahtamapyan* (*ibid.*: 85). He also introduced the *Vinaya* examinations and brought in measures to force the Sangha to take them. Despite Bodawhpaya's promotion of the formal examinations, monastic education during his reign remained autonomous and less centralised. That is, both the teacher and the student had freedom to choose subjects, including secular subjects such as astrology, medicine, mathematics, magic, law and Sanskrit literature, and decide forms of assessment according to their own scholarly interest (*ibid.*: 40 and 46-47). The Sangha resisted the formal examinations because monastic teachers and students wanted to retain full freedom in educational management (*ibid.*: 88-89). Therefore, Bodawhpaya did not succeed in centralising monastic education through the formal examinations.

Unlike his predecessors, Mindon succeeded in persuading the Sangha to accept the formal examinations as a way of protecting and promoting Buddhism. Mindon tactfully used the emerging nationalist sentiment amongst the Sangha and the idea of specialisation-orientated examinations in order to win the support of the Sangha in reforming monastic education. He

transformed the curricula and the format of the *Vinaya* examinations and the *Pahtamapyan* examinations, and introduced another examination for those who wished to study the *Abhidhamma* in depth (*ibid*.: 126-133). Since the *Vinaya* and the *Abhidhamma* syllabuses included all canonical *vinaya* texts and *abhidhamma* texts in the Burmese edition of the Pāli canon – namely five volumes of the *Vinaya* and seven of the *Abhidhamma*, taking these examinations became as a specialist pursuit for the Sangha. Mindon's reformation of the *Pahtamapyan* syllabus on the whole kept the same texts from the old syllabus under Bodawhpaya. For instance, the *abhidhamma* texts, i.e. the *Mātikā*, the *Dhātukathā*, the *Yamaka* and the *Paṭṭhāna*,[18] which were on the *Pahtamapyan* syllabus since Bodawhpaya's reign, were kept in the new syllabus under Mindon (*ibid*.: 132-133).[19] The main difference between Bodawhpaya's *Pahtamapyan* syllabus and Mindon's was in the format. The earlier format was divided into two categories: one for candidates for the novicehood and the other for the monkhood. The later format replaced these categories with three levels, namely *pahtamagne*, 'primary', *pahtamalat*, 'intermediate', and *pahtamagyi*, 'advanced' (*ibid*.: 128-129). In the examinations held during Mindon's reign, the candidates recited the texts from memory. The ability to commit the texts to memory and subsequently recall them with precision was, and still is, seen as the mastery of *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma* on the part of successful candidates, who are rewarded with prestige and with material support from the lay devotees.[20] Thus, Mindon tapped into the Sangha's psyche, which perceives the mastery of these texts as not only fulfilling their duties to preserve the golden words of the Buddha, but also satisfying their scholarly pride.

In addition to these examinations, in 1870 Mindon sponsored a three-months-long discussion of the *Paṭṭhāna* led by the *Thudhamma* monks at a specially built hall called the *Pa-htan"* Hall, the 'hall of *Paṭṭhāna*', (Than Tun 1989: 729-730). Such emphasis on the *Paṭṭhāna* probably reflected the tradition that the study of *Abhidhamma* is so vital to the perpetuation of the Buddha's *sāsana* and that the first sign of the decline of Buddhism is thought to be signaled by its disappearance. When Burma under Mindon was facing the British threat, the *Paṭṭhāna* was perhaps seen as a protective shield guarding Burmese Theravāda Buddhism and the Burmese Buddhist kingdom. As mentioned above, through memorisation and recitation of the canonical Pāli texts, the Thudhamma monks had successfully convinced the royal court of their authoritative textualism (Charney 2006: 44). In particular, the Thudhamma monks portrayed a tradition of committing the Pāli texts to memory as proper monastic training (Charney 2006: 43).

[18] For an overview of the topics covered in the canonical *Abhidhamma* texts, see Nyanatiloka's (1983) *Guide Through the Abhidhamma Piṭaka*.
[19] See Dhammasāmi (2004: Appendix A) for the syllabus of the *Pahtamapyan* examinations under Bodawhpaya.
[20] Dhammasāmi (2004: 4-15) critiques the material rewards and fame that the formal examinations bring for successful monastic candidates.

It could be suggested that it was in response to the threat of the British that Mindon undertook reform based on the in-depth study of the canonical and post-canonical texts. Through such active promotion of the *Abhidhamma* and the *Vinaya*, the study of traditional secular subjects became marginalized, and they subsequently disappeared from the formal Burmese monastic education system.

After the colonization of the whole of Myanmar in 1885, the British initially adopted a policy of so-called neutrality towards religion, and for this reason suspended the *Pahtamapyan* and other monastic examinations, and ended all support for the Sangha. This naturally heightened the fear that under British rule the end of Buddhism was now a real possibility. The anxiety to safeguard the Buddha's *sāsana,* in particular the *pariyatti-sāsana*, spread to the lay people. As a result, leading monks and prominent community leaders, including influential businessmen, came together to establish the Cetiyaṅgaṇa Pariyatti Dhammānuggaha Association (The Association of the (Shwedagon) Pagoda for the Promotion of Buddhist Teachings and Study) in Yangon and the Pariyatti Sāsanahita Association (The Association of the Benefit of the Buddha's Religion through Study), known as *That-kya-thi-ha* in Burmese (*sakyāsīha*), in Mandalay in the 1890s. Both associations are still actively involved in holding non-governmental monastic examinations in Myanmar.[21] Their main aim was, and still is, to propagate the *sāsana* through the promotion of the Buddhist teachings by holding monastic examinations. The examinations of the two associations became known as *a-myo-tha-sa-mei-pwe*, 'national examinations'. These are also known as *abhivaṃsa*, 'higher', examinations because the candidates are required to undertake detailed and comprehensive study not just of the Pāli canon, including the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*, but the commentaries and handbooks such as the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* and the commentaries on it as well. Instead of a secularised monastic education system, leading members of the Sangha in Myanmar have been opposed to secularisation of the monastic education to the present day. As Schober observes, the resistance to secularisation of monastic education by the Sangha coincided with a rapid increase in demand for secular education provided by the British amongst the lay people with English as the medium of instruction, and thus polarised the monastic and lay education (Schober 2007: 56-63).[22] This then in turn has reinforced the in-depth study of *Abhidhamma* and other Buddhist texts within the formal monastic education system. Therefore, it could be suggested that the text-based reforms initiated by the final kings of Myanmar have created legacies in Burmese Buddhism: the retention of more complex systems of Buddhist

[21] On different types of monastic examinations in Myanmar, see Kyaw (2012).
[22] See Schober (2007: 52-70) for the detailed study of the impact of colonial knowledge on monastic education.

doctrine based on *Abhidhamma* and the Mahāvihāra commentarial tradition,[23] and the involvement of lay people in monastic education through the growing number of lay associations.[24]

By educating the monastics in specialized teaching monasteries and training them through a rigorous, complex system of standardized monastic curricula, the Burmese Sangha and laity believe that they are "doing the work of the *sāsana*" (Carbine 2014: 3), which is called in Burmese *tha-tha-na-pyu.* In other words, 'doing the work of the *sāsana*' is seen by Burmese Buddhists as doing missionary work. Therefore, the scriptural-learning for Burmese monastics—past and present—is regarded as a way to preserve the Buddha's *sāsana* and as a means to protect against foreign and internal threats to Buddhism and the Burmese Buddhist nation. In addition, the resulting scriptural-learning also equips Burmese monastic and lay literati with the textual authority to express critical responses, i.e. to express criticality, as I shall show below.

Pedagogical philosophy and approach of teaching monasteries

There is a living tradition of rote learning of the canonical texts and exegetical Buddhist texts and of orality amongst the Burmese Sangha and lay literati (see above). In this section, we shall examine how the use of this ancient approach to learning applied to the study of Buddhist texts is informed by the pedagogical philosophy of teaching monasteries. By pedagogical philosophy, I mean the purpose and philosophical foundations of the approach to teaching used in monastic teaching institutions in relation to the study of the canonical texts and other Buddhist texts.

The primary purpose of the teaching institutions, as we have seen above, focuses on duties relating to scriptural learning, which in turn allows for the transmission of the whole corpus of Buddhist scriptures, namely the Pāli canon, the exegetical commentaries and sub-commentaries on the canonical texts—including vernacular Buddhist texts—to subsequent generations of the Sangha. With the aim to transmit the Buddhist scriptures to future generations and thus to preserve the Buddha's *sāsana*, it is not surprising to find that the pedagogical philosophy of teaching monasteries is similar to what Michael Gorman calls a "missional hermeneutic"

[23] The writing of the commentaries, sub-commentaries and manuals occurred under the auspices of the Mahāvihāra monastery in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka between the 5th and 12th century C.E. In the 12th century, this commentarial tradition "came to dominate the Buddhism of Sri Lanka and would in turn strongly influence the textual and ordination lineages of Southeast Asia" (Crosby 2014: 3). See Crosby (2003: 95-96 and 2014: 81) for the rise of the Mahāvihāra commentarial tradition in Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia.

[24] On the involvement of lay people in the study of *abhidhamma* texts through Ledi Hsayadaw's influence, see Braun (2013: 102-121). In terms of the involvement of lay people in insight meditation practice and tradition in the 20th century, see Houtman (1991: 124-158) and Jordt (2001).

(Gorman 2009: 19; 155-158). In his book on approaches to the study of ancient and medieval religious texts, Gorman includes the missional hermeneutic as an approach to the study of biblical exegesis. Under this approach, "scripture bears witness to the *mission Dei* and invites the believing community to see itself as an agent of that mission and to discern and participate in it" (Gorman 2009: 239). While Gorman's work is written from the perspective of Christian theology, the approaches outlined there are applicable to the study of Buddhist texts and relevant to our discussion on the pedagogical philosophy of teaching monasteries. In the Buddhist context, the spirit of missionary work is exemplified by the account of the Buddha sending out the first sixty missionaries in the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (Mv. 1.11.1).[25] Such a spirit of missionary work in Buddhism is still alive in modern times.[26] As we have seen above, the idea that the believing community is an agent of the transmission and preservation of the *sāsana* is ubiquitous in Burmese Buddhism.

In terms of the pedagogical approach of the teaching monasteries, the missional hermeneutic entails the interpretation of Buddhist scriptures with missionary aims and objectives. In other words, the study and interpretation of the Buddhist texts in a religious context aim to instill faith and confidence in the triple Jewels, i.e. the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, within oneself and to propagate the Buddha's teachings. What this means in practice is that Buddhist texts are studied within a Buddhist framework with normative interpretations of the canonical and exegetical texts. In the purely religious curricula as discussed above, the main objective for which the students have to strive is to see the Buddha in his own words, as found in the Pāli canon and as given by one's own teacher. We have also seen that students do not question their monk teacher and that they learn what he teaches them. As Dhammasāmi rightly observes, the abbot of a monastery who looks after the students' educational, moral and spiritual developments and their welfare has an unparalleled authority. Students, therefore, never question his authority. Dhammasāmi adds that students, therefore, do not learn how to question their teacher (Dhammasāmi 2004: 277). This means a culture of learning through questioning the authenticity, validity and logic of Buddhist texts and one's own teacher's work is simply absent within the formal monastic curricula and examination system. The pedagogical philosophy to preserve the Buddhist scriptures and thus safeguard the Buddha's *sāsana* is achieved through the missional hermeneutic approach and rote learning of the Buddhist scriptures.

The art of memory: the study of *Abhidhamma*

[25] See Horner (2000: 28) for the English translation of the *Mahāvagga* account of the Buddha sending the first sixty missionaries.
[26] See Buddharakkhita (2011) for his account of his own Buddhist missionary work in Uganda, Africa.

The *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, known in Burmese as *Thin"gyo*, is one of the three core texts that form the architecture of the Burmese monastic education. The other two texts are the *Kaccāyanavyākaraṇa*, the Pāli grammatical text ascribed to Kaccāyana, and the *Pāṭimokkha*, the discourse (*sutta*) listing the rules that govern the individual behavior of monks and (fully-ordained) nuns. These texts are considered as a vital preparation for the advanced study of other Buddhist texts in the formal monastic education system.

In scholarly discussion of memory and memory systems in ancient and modern European cultures, the phrase 'art of memory' is used in a broader context to refer to a variety of mnemonic principles and techniques employed to memorise things, places and texts, organise memory impressions, and improve recall. We shall see that the Burmese pedagogical approaches to the study of the *abhidhamma* texts are, in fact, ways to organise memory impressions of texts, and thus, improve recall of the texts. As we shall see, the ability to remember and recall details from the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* is crucial for the advanced study of Buddhist texts and other scholarly activities.

Turning specifically to Burmese study of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, the approach used by monastics entails students committing to memory all its 305 Pāli verses,[27] before the teacher gives them a translation and explanation of the text. For higher study, they may then study the text using various commentaries and pedagogical textbooks written in Burmese by experts on *Abhidhamma,* such as the Mahagandayon Sayadaw Ven. Janakābhivaṃsa (1990-1977), a monastic teacher and an educationist who revived the above-mentioned teaching monastery, the Mahagandayon Sathintaik. Although a detailed study and analysis of the roles of memory and memorisation has not been undertaken in the context of Burmese monastic education, we can at least deduce – on the basis of primary and secondary sources – that memorisation has been a vital part of Buddhist pedagogy in the Burmese monastic culture since the Pagan period (1044-1279).[28]

For the Burmese, rote learning or memorisation of a text is achieved through repeatedly reading or reciting the text out loud. The process is similar to that observed by Samuels writing on learning and performing the *paritta* texts by novices in Sri Lanka: a teacher recites the text in question line by line, and the students repeat it in unison (Samuels 2005: 349). Through repeating the text with the teacher, the students learn where to break up Pāli *sandhi*—'conjunction of final and initial letters, or of letters within a word' (Collins 2006: 147)—and how and where to stretch

[27] This number is based on Bhikkhu Bodhi's (2010) edition of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*.
[28] Bode and Visuddhābhivaṃsa *et al.*, based on the *Sāsanavaṃsadīpa*, mention a story of how busy mothers of families in Pagan period took time to learn the whole section of the skilful triplet (*kusala-tika*) of the *Paṭṭhāna* and the Pāli grammar by-heart (Bode 1966: 25, f.n. 3; Visuddhābhivaṃsa *et al.* 1987: *sa*).

the Pāli syllables so as not to change the words' meaning (Samuels 2005: 349). With long texts such as the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha,* the teacher divides the text into smaller portions making it easier for memorisation.

Once students have received this kind of formal guidance from the teacher, they recite the text individually or in small groups so as to imprint the text to memory. The description below captures the lively oral aspect of the traditional pedagogy at the Gwei″pin Tawya (forest monastery), where Mogok Sayadaw Ven. U Vimala (1899-1962), the founder of the Mogok insight (*vipassanā*) meditation tradition in Myanmar, stayed until he was 14 years old. Ven. U Ghosita, the author of the biography of Mogok Hsayadaw, describes how the novices at the village monastery practised recitation of the Pāli verses of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* out loud as a part of their training to memorise the text.

> At Gwei″pin forest monastery, Koyin [novice] Vimala is thoroughly enjoying the time with other novices memorising [*sa-kyak* in Burmese] the texts. The noisy sounds of their recitation [of the texts] fill the whole monastery. . . . From time to time, they are memorising and taking mental notes [of the text] by shouting out loud [the Pāli verses]. (Ghosita 2002: 22; my translation)

Ghosita's account highlights that the students have to commit to memory the whole of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, including the introductory verse (Ghosita 2002: 23).

> *Sammāsambuddham atulaṃ,*
> *Sasaddhammagaṇuttamaṃ.*
> *Abhivādiya bhāsissaṃ,*
> *Abhidammatthasaṅgahaṃ.*
> Having respectfully saluted the Fully Enlightened One, the Peerless One,
> along with the Sublime Teaching and the Noble Order,
> I will speak the Manual of *Abhidhamma* – a compendium of the things contained in the *Abhidhamma*. (Translation Bodhi 2010: 23)

This Pāli verse is the introductory verse of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*. This account reflects the living oral tradition of monastic education in Myanmar, which is an extremely common sight in monasteries and nunneries up to the present day.[29]

Before we explore further the process through which the students memorise the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, I would like to point out similarities between the understanding and practice of the memorisation process in medieval monastic culture in Europe and in modern monastic culture in Myanmar. I draw on Mary Carruthers' work on the former,[30] and on the above quotation from Mogok Hsayadaw's biography in order to highlight two issues related to

[29] On scholarly discussion of the dynamics involved in oral transmission of Buddhist texts in early Buddhism, see Cousins (1983), Gombrich (1990), Gethin (1992), Allon (1997), Wynne (2004) and Anālayo (2007 and 2009).
[30] See Mary Carruthers' book entitled *The Book of Memory: A study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, first published in 1990, on the training and used of memory for a variety of purposes and contexts in European cultures during the Middle Ages.

memorisation techniques. The first is related to the use of imagery of food and digestion with respect to memorisation of a text. I have translated the Burmese word *sa-kyak*, which literally means 'cooking letter/character' or 'cooking food', as 'memorising'. The word *sa* can mean either 'letter' or 'food', and the verb *kyak* is 'to cook'. In the context of the Burmese education system – whether monastic or secular – the phrase *sa-kyak* is used to refer to the process of training memory to remember texts. In this context, the phrase *sa-kyak* has a sense of processing the text so that it can be committed to one's memory. Other phrases such as *sa-pyan*, 'ruminate text', and *sa-an*, 'regurgitate text', are also used in relation to memorial activities in Burmese monastic culture.

The second issue, which is related to the first, is concerned with reading the text aloud by mouthing the words as the text is imprinted on one's memory. Thus, the relationship the Burmese have to the text is based on an oral aspect of learning, as with the medieval scholar's relationship to his text in medieval Europe. Carruthers writes,

> The medieval scholar's relationship to his texts is quite different from modern objectivity [in European culture]. Reading is to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud, or like a bee making honey from the nectar of flowers. Reading is memorized with the aid of murmur, mouthing the words sub-vocally as one turns the text over in one's memory. (Carruthers 2011: 205)

Carruthers observes, "it is this movement of the mouth that established rumination as a basic metaphor for memorial activities" (Carruthers 2011: 206). Thus, the oral aspect of the memorisation process, i.e. mouthing the words sub-vocally or aloud, is important in monastic learning in both European medieval and Burmese modern traditions. Carruthers adds, "The process familiarizes a text to a medieval scholar, in a way like that by which human beings may be said to familiarize their food. It is both physiological and psychological, and it changes both the food and its consumer" (Carruthers 2011: 206). As in European medieval culture, we have seen that the Burmese also use the imagery of food and rumination when referring to the process of training memory and internalization of the text. Therefore, these two aspects, namely the use of rumination/digestion of food as an imagery linked to the memorial activities, and the use of an oral aspect of learning by mouthing the words, are common to medieval monastic culture in Europe and modern monastic culture in Myanmar.

It is worth recalling that the English term 'meditation' is derived from the medieval term *meditatio* (Latin), which was itself an aspect of medieval European mnemonic technique. In the context of memorial activities, *meditatio* referred to the process in which one completely internalises what one has read or memorized (Carruthers 2011: 203). Carruthers reports that medieval scholars such as Quintilian and Martianus Capella recommend that texts to be learned

are more usefully recited in a murmur (Carruthers 2011: 211-215). This is because the interior senses are engaged more fully in imprinting words into memory when memorisation is performed in a low voice. On the basis of my own experience in memorising the *Paṭṭhāna*, I can confirm that a murmur is helpful in the memorisation process. With a loud recitation, it is as if one cannot hear oneself think. Another benefit of recitation in a low voice is that it conserves one's energy, whereas a loud recitation makes the body tired. During my fieldwork, I observed that most monks and nuns who are studying for the *Pahtamapyan* examinations corresponding to the basic and intermediate levels of study recite the texts in a loud voice. I also observed at a teaching nunnery, the Sakyadhītā Sathintaik in Sagaing, that nuns who are studying for the *Dhammācariya* Examinations recite the texts in a murmur, or form study groups to discuss the topics. Moreover, a couple of my informants during my doctoral fieldwork reported that the Yaw Tipiṭaka Hsayadaw Ven. U Sīrinandābhivaṃsa (1943-) used 'silent reading' as a mnemonic technique in order to study for the Tipiṭakadhāra Examinations. As Carruthers notes, silent reading is the accompaniment and also the result of being attentive, of meditation, and memory, but it is evidently not incompatible with the vocal murmur. Therefore, a variety of styles of reading and recitation is used in the memorisation process.

To return to the description of memorisation techniques used by novices in order to memorise the whole of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, it is important to recall that under the formal examination-orientated system the core texts are to be memorised at a young age. Ghosita observes,

> At this age [i.e. nine or ten years old], they do not have other things on their mind. They follow their teacher's instruction precisely: if they are told to memorise, they memorise; . . . to recite, they recite without hesitation. (Ghosita 2002: 23)

In this pedagogical approach, training one's memory at a young age is very important as it normally leads to lifelong retention of the text in one's memory. The teacher provides the *a-nek*, 'semantic meaning', of the text, only when the students have mastered the Pāli verses, i.e. when they are capable of reciting them in any order without a prompt. Occasionally, the teacher may explain the meaning by giving examples and analogies that young novices can understand. In addition to giving and explaining the semantic meaning of the texts during daytime, students may have lessons on the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* at night. The term for these night-lessons in Burmese is *nya'wa*. During *nya'wa* the teacher gives additional, detailed explanation and analysis of reality in terms of the fourfold *Abhidhamma* category, i.e. consciousness (*citta*), mental factors (*cetasika*), materiality (*rūpa*) and nirvana (*nibbāna*),[31] without looking at any book or text.

[31] For a detailed explanation of the fourfold *Abhidhamma* category, see Kyaw (2014: 15-19).

We have, so far, seen the traditional pedagogical approach to the learning of the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* in Burmese monastic culture. In this approach, young novices engage in rote learning of the text. Only after completing the task of memorisation thoroughly, do they begin to study the meaning of what they have memorised. The students also are trained at night on how to retrieve specific aspects of the text and do detailed analysis of it. Such systematic training of memory from an early age onwards ensures not only a precise recollection of the texts, but also a quick retrieval of specific information for analytical study of the *Abhidhamma*.

While one may lament that the texts are not studied academically in the modern sense of applying learning and teaching approaches such as critical thinking, critical analysis and so forth to the textual study, it is the case that after their formal monastic education the majority of monastics trained in this pedagogical tradition have nearly every single piece of information from the Pāli canon at their fingertips. This is particularly true for monks who have completed the national monastic examinations such as '*abhivaṃsa*' examinations and/or the Tipiṭakadhāra Selection Examinations, i.e. a series of oral and written examinations covering a total of 20 books of the *Tipiṭaka* plus the exegeses on these canonical texts.[32] Ven. Aggamahāpaṇḍita[33] Paṇḍitābhivaṃsa, the former rector of the State Pariyatti Sāsana University of Yangon, explains a practical benefit of rote learning as follows.

> In the old days, texts existed only in manuscripts. Therefore, when we have conversations [with other monks] or are giving a speech in front of an audience, we have to give a proof (*sādhaka*). For example, we can find such and such in the Pāli [i.e. canon], and/or in *aṭṭhakathā* [i.e. commentary]. This is how we give proof. Not only that, we can find in the canon the phrase '*āgatāgamo*', which means handed scriptures down by memory or through word-of-mouth. This means we know the texts by-heart very well, and can use it [i.e. memorised text] when we are challenged to prove our statements. (Ven. Paṇḍitābhivaṃsa, interviewed on 10 May 2012)

This explanation illustrates that rote learning, or memorising the texts with precision, serves as a crucial basis for providing evidence during scholarly discussions amongst monastic experts and, indeed, for preaching and giving *dhamma* talks. At the higher level of study of Buddhist literature and in the context of scholarly activities such as giving *dhamma* talks and writing books, memorised knowledge may be applied critically in order to create new, sometimes controversial, ideas and interpretations of the Buddhist texts and teachings.

As I hinted above, in Burmese monastic culture, education—as in other cultures—is a process with different levels of learning. At the basic level, rote learning is emphasised, as seen in the case of novices memorising the *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha* and other core texts. The separation

[32] See Dhammasāmi and Kyaw (2012) on a brief history of the Tipiṭakadhāra Selection Examinations.
[33] The term 'Aggamahāpaṇḍita', which literally means the 'highest great scholar', is an honorary title given to learned monks by the state.

of rote learning from content explanation implies that the 'rumination'—as in a deep engagement with the text so as to create new useful experiences and ideas—does not occur at the basic level of learning. Nevertheless, Shwe-sin Tipiṭaka Sayadaw Ven. Dr. Gandhamālālaṅkāra (1968-)—who is the ninth monk to pass the Tipiṭakadhāra Selection Examinations—points out that at the advanced level of study such as undertaking written examinations on the *Paṭṭhāna* as a part of the Tipiṭakadhāra Examinations, it is crucial not only to remember and recall the canonical and post-canonical texts, but also to reconfigure and combine memorised knowledge in order to answer analytical questions (Shwe-sin Tipiṭaka Hsayadaw, interviewed on 21 December 2011). Moreover, memorised knowledge, which has been reflected upon and internalized, serves as a basis for *dhamma* talks, sermons and lectures given by prominent, learned monks such as Mahagandayon Sayadaw and Bamaw Sayadaw. For instance, Bamaw Sayadaw Ven. Dr. Kumārābhivaṃsa (1929-)—the Chairman of the State Saṅgha Mahānāyaka Committee of Myanmar—in his *dhamma* talks on the *Paṭṭhāna*, not only demonstrates in-depth knowledge of the topic, but also draws on memorised knowledge of the *Paṭṭhāna* and other topics to teach it in a useful and meaningful way for the audience (Kumārābhivaṃsa 05-14 June 2009).[34]

Although this process of reconfiguring and combining memorised knowledge may not correspond closely with the definition of criticality that was mentioned above, such practice could be seen as the beginning of criticality. It also corresponds with the early stages of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives such as knowledge, comprehension, and application. It is important to note that a majority of Burmese monastics would not go beyond the framework of Burmese social norms and Buddhist worldviews when they are answering formal examination questions or giving *dhamma* talks, i.e. their criticality would not extend to questioning such things. Nevertheless, some Burmese monastic teachers and educationists do apply their expert knowledge critically in complex subject areas such as legal matters (*Vinaya*) and analytical philosophy (*Abhidhamma*). Sometimes this has been controversial and have attracted public debate and protest. For instance, a scholarly debate surrounding the *Paramatthadīpanī*, a commentary on *Abhidhamma*, written by Ledi Sayadaw Ven. U Ñāṇa (1846-1923) in the early 1900s, sparked the production of over forty commentarial texts and the public burning of books (Braun 2013: 45). Sometimes the response has come from the monastic and state authorities. When some other monks who were experts in *Abhidhamma* came to his defense, or declined to do so, they did so on the basis of the detail of the erudition and *abhidhamma*-based reasoning that he

[34] Bamaw Sayadaw Ven. Dr. Kumārābhivaṃsa gave a ten-day *dhamma* talk on *paṭṭhāna* in 2009 in Yangon. In his *dhamma* talks, he draws on various canonical and post-canonical texts and his own experience in learning the *Paṭṭhāna* to explain the 24 conditions to lay audience.

used in the text.[35] In other words, his criticality had to be supported by his in-depth textual knowledge. There have been monastic court cases relating to controversial issues surrounding orthodoxy of Buddhist teachings and Buddhist legal matters, which are known in Myanmar as *vinicchaya* (literally 'judgement' or 'trial') cases. In a *vinicchaya* case, both sides, namely the defendant and the prosecutor, use their textual expertise analytically in order to provide textual evidence in support of their respective arguments and views. The process produces encyclopedic court proceedings which are usually later published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Yangon (formerly Rangoon), Myanmar. Thus, these controversial cases are indicative of the presence of critical thinking and criticality amongst Burmese monastic literati. While it is important to mention the hidden criticality amongst Burmese monastic teachers here, it is not my intention to explore in detail the way in which specific Burmese monastic literati and educationists since the late 19th century have exercised criticality in their scholarly activities. This merits a separate article on its own.

Conclusions

In Myanmar, we find that formal, standardized monastic examinations have resulted in an education system that focuses on learning skills such as rote learning and recall from memory, as opposed to a system that emphasizes and appreciates skills such as critical thinking, analysis, evaluation and creation of new knowledge. Rote learning provides a strong foundation for the development of higher level learning skills, including—but not limited to—criticality, i.e. a practice that encompasses analytical and logical thinking skills, as well as the ability to think anew. As monastic teachers such as Ven. Aggamahāpaṇḍita Paṇḍitābhivaṃsa and the Shwe-sin Tipiṭaka Sayadaw observe, rote learning has an important function in provision of evidence during scholarly discussions amongst experts and in creation of new ideas as well as in answering analytical questions at advanced level monastic examinations. The view held by the Burmese monastics, namely that rote learning is an important foundation for advanced level of study and creative thinking, accords with Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive and learning objectives. As we have seen above, Bloom's taxonomy—whether the original or the revised—begins with knowledge or remembering, and progresses to other aspects of cognition and learning such as understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating on the basis of the knowledge that one has acquired.

[35] See Braun (2013: 46-76) for the detailed discussion of the way other monks and lay literati responded to the *Paramatthadīpanī* through the well-established tradition of scholastic argumentation.

In addition to the emphasis given to rote learning, Burmese monastic education focuses on learning of centralised, non-secularised monastic curricula. As an expression of reform movements in Myanmar, the range of subjects which is regarded as 'valid' for the monastic curricula has become restricted to Buddhist texts. These two emphases, i.e. the traditional pedagogical approach of rote learning and the non-secularised monastic curricula, have led to the retention of more complex systems of Buddhist doctrine based on *Abhidhamma* and other exegetical texts and the establishment of a strong literary tradition amongst monastic and lay literati in Myanmar. Paradoxically, the very system that has been established to ensure uniformity and obedience by inhibiting critical thinking and attitudes provides favourable circumstances for the development of textual expertise and learning, which in turn equip monks with the textual authority, and the corresponding stature, to have critical responses. It is the textual authority and stature that in turn enables monastic teachers and educationists, who are no longer within the constraints of the formal monastic education system, to exercise criticality. Due to limited space in this article, we have not examined in detail how the Burmese monastic and lay literati critically apply memorized knowledge outside the formal monastic education system and thus exercise criticality in a wider social domain. And yet, we have revealed the significant functions of scriptural-learning (*pariyatti*) in Burmese Buddhism and the traditional pedagogical approaches of teaching institutions for monastics in Myanmar with a focus on mnemonic techniques and memorial activities.

One of the recurrent themes throughout this article is how an education system, including pedagogical and learning approaches of that system, is informed and curtailed by political, religious and social conditions. The Western political framework, i.e. liberal democracy, not only provides appropriate social, political, and institutional conditions for the development of 'critical citizens', but also its existence depends on the criticality agenda. Democratic countries such as the UK and the USA therefore emphasize criticality as an aspect of education for democratic citizenship. Critical thinking is an essential element of learning in citizenship education for young people in the UK (Citizenship Foundation 2006: 8). Higher Education in the UK plays a key role in the development of 'critical citizens' by using pedagogical and learning approaches that focus on and value criticality. In contrast, the political framework of Myanmar, although moving towards a democratic paradigm, does not provide favourable conditions such as conducive educational programmes and policies for the development of 'critical citizens' and for the freedom to exercise criticality. At the equivalents to high school and undergraduate levels, namely the *Pahtamapyan* examinations, memorisation and regurgitation of text from memorized knowledge are not only crucial for the development of textual erudition, but also rewarded

because such reproduction of text means passing the examinations upon which one's stature is based. This system of reward for rote learning actually inhibits and punishes the exercise of criticality within the formal monastic curricula of Myanmar. The formal monastic education system in Myanmar is not 'critical education', and thus skills such as critical questioning and independent learning are not part of the monastic curriculum. What this means is that the transition from the formal monastic education system of Myanmar to the modern, secularized education system of the West is in general more challenging for Burmese monastics.

However, we cannot claim an absence in Myanmar of individual monks who are equipped with criticality. This can be seen by the existence of responses both historically and in the contemporary period by monks to the status quo, both within Buddhism and within the nation. To generalise that Burmese monastics – or other Asian students – are lacking critical thinking and independent learning means that we might be overlooking the agency of individuals. Asian students as individuals are agents in their own right, i.e. they have the capacity to engage with a given social and political structure and to make their own choices independently. The *vinicchaya* cases mentioned above, for example, are indicative of individuals' agency because both the defendant and the prosecutor practise criticality. In doing so, the defendant makes his or her own choices in order to challenge the existing social norms and worldviews, while the prosecutor chooses to reaffirm the tradition and the existing worldviews. Our investigations of monastic education in Myanmar demonstrates that the concept of criticality is informed by social and political conditions, and that freedom to exercise criticality is curtailed by religious, social, and political boundaries.

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